

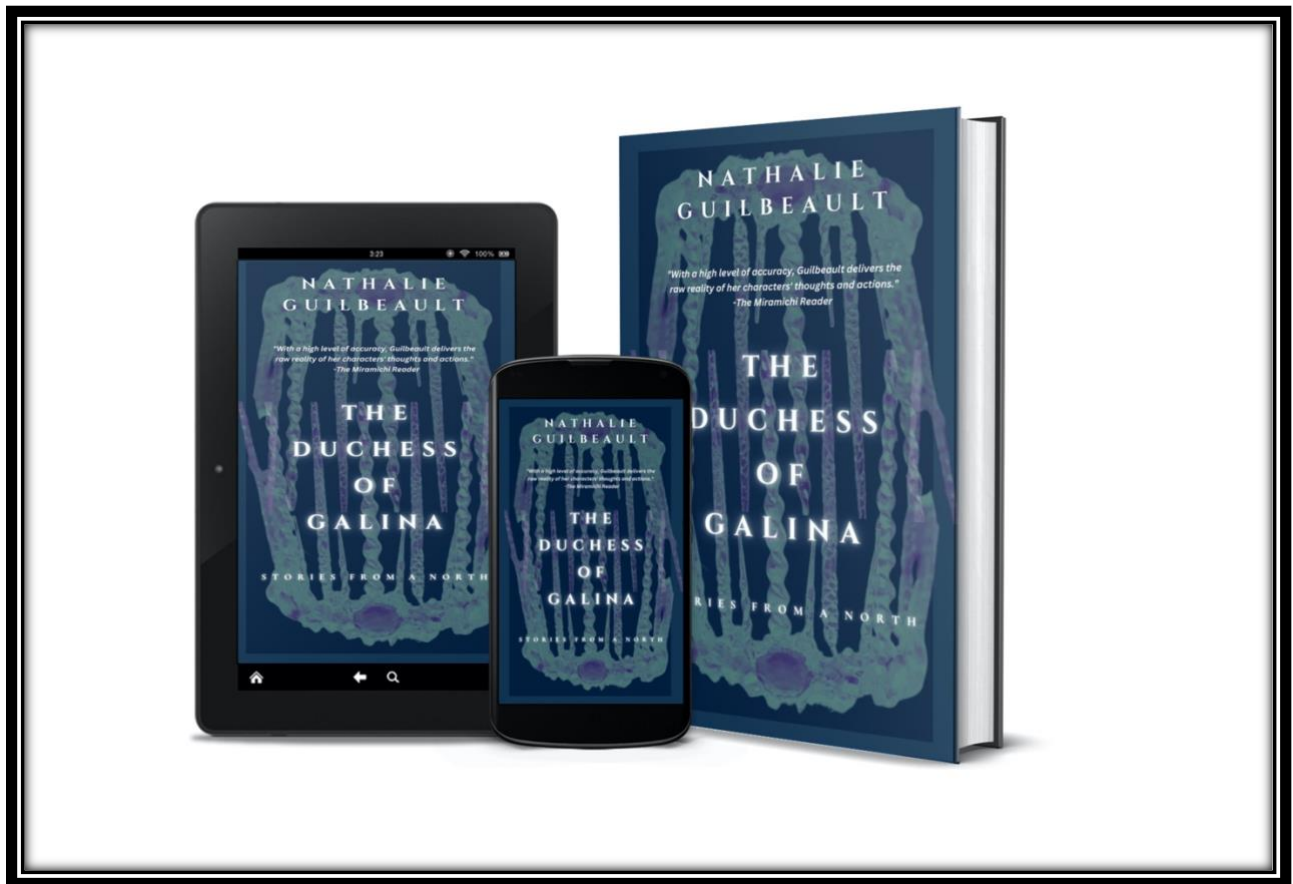
Nathalie Guilbeault/*THE DUCHESS OF GALINA*, *Chaos & Stories from a North* - excerpt

THE DUCHESS OF GALINA

Chaos & Stories from a North

©NathalieGuilbeault

Excerpt



OCTOBER 2024

MONTREAL PUBLISHING COMPANY

MP
Publishing

THE DUCHESS OF GALINA

Chaos & Stories from a North

BETWEEN THE 49TH AND THE 55TH NORTHERN PARALLELS

Lusa's tongue hung sideways batting the wind, and the little girl looked at her, her hand resting on the dog's coat. The girl tilted her small face against the same wind—the same breeze, now quickening. She smiled. A late July day, a day belonging to the cold summers of this land, dusk about to surround them, the sun coming from a reliable west, behind the forest of larch and black spruce. Between dog and wolf—its own thing, the man, too, father to the girl, and he pointed to the sky, just like Lusa.

He loosely held the throttle, his eyes squinting as they hovered over the water, searching for the ridge of the woodland. Speeding back to where they had left the Suburban truck in the morning, his mind was empty, a fulfilling blank—the quiet void inside his bliss. They had spent the day fishing on the Meo River, an offshoot of the Caniapiscaw River, and now, five kilometers from shore, they were returning home, the bottom of the fifteen-foot Zodiac filled with trout.

She stood at the front of the boat, riding point, looking ahead, sureness inside her young mind: this complicity, bountiful and boundless—of being held in these moments like this; of leaning into the elements that embraced her—like her father. Her fingers in the water, not resisting the current, its glacial feel; and her, too, accepting of this world that would forever be with her.

That day.

A red dot in the distance—what? An ill-placed balloon heaving? Pulling them. It could have been anything, the man would later share. I could have not seen ... really looked—dismissed it. But the man did, he didn't look away—dismiss, and he decided to investigate, lowering the front of the Zodiac until it kissed the cold of the grey river.

The dusk had fallen, and as they fled through its uncertainties, they approached—something? Her eyes widened. It's capsized! she yelled.

Throttling down, tossed by the water, the man prudently maneuvered the inflatable closer to the canoe. He grabbed the handle located on its side and as he pulled the small boat to him, Lusa, tail up and body alert, placed her front paws on the bow of the boat. Grab her collar, her father called to her, or else she'll jump onto the canoe, and we don't need that trouble, too.

In silence they looked on, trying to dissect, gray from gray, ripple from ripple, until the sound of Lusa compelled them to follow her gaze—an impatient whining. Forty feet from where they had stopped, the hint of movement broke the river's shakes. A head bouncing, an arm like a small hand, fighting. There, the girl yelled, pointing.

They sped up, stopping a few feet from the man. The boat in neutral, its motor returning water into the river, the sounding of a rush; the sounding of a strange stillness—and he was violet-coloured; his lips; his face, and shivering, glossy eyes pointed to the sky, the man holding, as best he could, a burnt-orange floating jacket.

Dad ...

I know.

Turning to his daughter, he told her to remain at the stern of the Zodiac, that he needed her to steady the boat. See that dark spot over there? The truck? Aim for it, sweetie.

Directing his attention to the water, he looked at the man. Give me your hand, he yelled, as he extended his arm, aiming for the man's exposed hand. The man in the water stared at the face looking down at him, his expression of shock carved on his own face beginning to let go, and he slowly tried to unfold his arm and grab the helping hand. Several attempts and their fingers finally interlocked into a slippery connection.

With his knees set against the rubber of the boat, the father pulled against the current; against the man's exhaustion, and he pulled until he recognised resistance he would not be able to

overcome. An unexpected weight. Fuck, he yelled, were you fly-fishing? The man blinked. Are you wearing fucking thigh waders? With teeth clattering and unable to speak, the man in the water nodded yes. The tackle box, get my knife! he shouted to his daughter. Now. We'll never be able to bring him inside the boat if I don't cut the straps latched to his waist.

How? her father thought.

Continue steering the boat, sweetie. I need to go in.

The girl obeyed, muted by the colours slicing the waters. Orange and violet, she would forever remember—the colours of imminent death. Here, now, and expectantly.

He removed his boots, and sliding his body into the water, knife in hand, he waddled closer to the man. His face, he thought. We don't have much time. Hypothermia is setting in. How long have you been in the water? The man's lips were shining and blue and he couldn't speak. Don't worry, I'll get you out. But I need to unhook the straps from you. Okay? You're too heavy with these on. You understand? What's your name? he yelled, as he felt for the belt. The man's lips slowly moved. Louder, I can't hear you. Syllables, faint, barely audible. Michael? All right, Michael. I can't see anything right now, the water's too dark. I can't feel your belt either. I need to go in, okay? And don't let go of your vest, hang on tight. Okay?

From nowhere—everywhere?—the sound of a splash came. The sound of Lusa falling between the men. Alerted by her master's disappearance, the dog reacted immediately, and was now being carried away by the river's current.

Lusa! the girl yelled, Lusa!

Startled, the man had let go of his vest and was sinking, his hands searching for the body underneath him.

The girl saw her father's mouth—just his mouth! The vest, the father yelled to his daughter, as he pushed and kicked away from the man. The vest! Throw me the vest!

The dog, Dad!

Later! The fucking vest, sweetie! And the rope as well!

Where is it?

Underneath the back seat. Quick!

He swam to where the bobbing head was, and quickly finding the man's arm, he tried to pull more of the body above the surface. Stop moving, and listen to me, he shouted through the wind, the vest his daughter had thrown, landing next to him. The cold of the water setting in, he tried guiding the man's arm through one of the vest's holes, and he yelled more, to stop grabbing him, to stop fighting him. Do you understand me? And with his eyes locked on the man's mouth, he heard—this whimpering: I was not alone.

What do you mean?

... Wife.

And with more sorrow to push back against, he said, all right, Michael, and he scanned the water around him. I'm so sorry, bro. He paused. But right now, it's just you and me, and I can't get you in the boat. You understand that? I've got a rope here and this is what's going to happen. I'm going to tie it around your chest, right below your arms. I'm going to pull you in. I'm going to tow you. Okay?

The man, closing his eyes, and he said, I want to sleep.

No, you don't, Michael. Keep your eyes open. You got kids?

A whisper. Two girls.

Okay. While I pull, you look up, all right? The sky. Think of them. Just think of them.

The water now colder, he began sluggishly to swim back to the boat, dragging the rope behind him.

Little hands helping him. Strange and distant words, hurry on, Dad, and put your coat back on. I can barely see Lusa from here. We have to go.

The river and the skies, a unity soon to be one, and while putting on his coat he watched his daughter throttle up. Looking back at the man, he heard her yell—there! Lusa!

Against a duotone of darkness, huddled in her parka, the young girl gripped the throttle hard, her eyes guessing, her mind unsure. Through the engine's noise, her father's words, meant to quell—reassure: We're almost there. Lusa can make it.

The waters of a July that felt like a wintry sea, embracing him harder, the coldness of it now unfelt, and the man continued to look up. Above him, mercury was running from the sun, wanting to go to sleep. And now, inside the skies, staring at him, his daughters' eyes.

Slow down the father told his daughter, we're almost there, see? Through the falling obscurity, he looked back, we're about to shore-up, Michael. One minute, he yelled, through the engines' rush.

They slid the boat onto the gravelly beach, the dog waiting, shaking water from its coat. The father jumping from the boat yelled to his daughter, get on the CB, and grabbing the rope he pulled as he ran into the water until he reached the man. He untied the rope from the man's chest. Call the hospital. Tell them where at the Meo. They'll know where to send the chopper. And start the truck. We need heat. The blankets are in the back.

Holding the man in his arms, he looked down at him, we made it, man. We made it. Look.

But the man could not, and with love cast from the sky, imprinted on his eyes, he closed them, to the quiet void between the 49th and the 55th northern parallels.

OCTOBER 2024